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Has The Time Come?*

REVEREND JAMES A. O'DONOHUE, J.C.D.**

In the spring of 1963 the Catholic medical world received a rather significant jolt when Dr. John Rock published *The Time Has Come*. This book, which claims to be "a Catholic doctor's proposals to end the battle over birth control," occasioned a real stir in all medical circles, both Catholic and non-Catholic. It has been the object of extraordinary praise and of violent condemnation. It has been strongly advocated almost as often as it has been vehemently denounced.

As many reviewers have pointed out, *The Time Has Come* is basically an *apologia* for "the pill." Since Catholic physicians recognize most of the basic fallacies in Dr. Rock's argumentation on behalf of the purely contraceptive values of the progestational steroids, this article will prescind from a discussion of the moral implications of this use and will rather focus the reader's attention on three points suggested by the book which should be of interest to all Catholic doctors as well as to all other members of the Church: 1) the formation of the Christian conscience, 2) the Christian's right to professional freedom in the face of ecclesiastical pronouncements, and 3) the obligations incumbent upon the Christian of getting involved in matters which are of real concern for the community. No exhaustive treatment of these salient points will be attempted here. This article intends only the stimulation of mature thought on these fundamental problems and that in view of their

particular applicability to *The Time Has Come*.

FORMATION OF THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

In the preface to his book, Dr. Rock, in attempting to justify his stand on the birth control issue, recalls a conversation he had as a boy with the parochial assistant of his home town, Father Finnicks. The priest is quoted as saying: "John, always stick to your conscience. Never let anyone else keep it for you . . . and I mean *anyone* else."

As the continuation of Christ's redemptive activity (an action incidentally which has man's freedom as its purpose), the Catholic Church must be the defender of true freedom. Among the various freedoms she must proclaim is freedom of conscience, and this indeed she does even to the point of teaching that one is obliged to follow a conscience which is objectively erroneous!! What is often forgotten in this matter, however, is the fact that the Church also insists upon the obligation such a person has to *correct* his erroneous conscience. Here there arises a serious problem but one which must be met: where does one find the real truth against which one can measure that which his conscience apparently presents as the truth?

The Christian has two sources from which he can derive the truth: reason and revelation. In itself, reason is capable of leading us to the truth but, because of the weakened state of our fallen nature, it must be frequently

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aided in this search. Such a supplement comes from revelation. One might define revelation as God Himself—Who is the Truth—telling us about Himself and all the things which He has created. As the Sacred Scriptures show, God has spoken many times and in many ways, but the fullness of His truth was made manifest when "the Word became flesh." In Christ, therefore, the fullness of the Divinity revealed in human form, we find the fullness of all truth.

In God's plan, the work which Christ began was to be continued and completed in the Church which He established. The mission of this community, this assembly of God's people, was to be identical to that of Christ Himself: worship of the Father and communication of His truth.

The Church is primarily concerned with worship of the Father but this also entails the teaching of His truth. It is a fundamental function of the Church, therefore, to set forth the truth and, conversely, to point out error. As a matter of fact, we can go even further and state that all men are obliged to hear her when she speaks, because in her the Spirit of God—which is the Truth Itself—speaks. The latter is indeed "a hard saying" for many, but it is a logical deduction from the nature of the Church as "the permanent incarnation of the Son of God."

As we know, the Church "speaks" in many ways. She sets forth the truth through the infallible pronouncements of Popes and Councils, through the "ordinary teaching power" as manifested in her oral and written traditions, and through the opinions of her official theologians. Whenever a Christian finds the dictates of his conscience going contrary to the teaching of the Church in any of these forms,

he must attempt to effect a reconciliation. This leads us to a consideration of our second point.

PROFESSIONAL FREEDOM VERSUS ECCLESIASTICAL PRONOUNCEMENTS

No human freedom is absolute. It is limited by the mere fact that it is human and, as such, it can be restricted by the rights of God and the rights of our fellow human beings. It is important here to mark the astute distinction between what Hans Küng calls "the illusion of freedom" and "the reality of freedom." The illusion of freedom is expressed by the phrase "I can do whatever I please . . . there is no limitation whatsoever placed upon me and none can be placed upon me."

The Church has a definite competence in the matter of truth. This competence, it must be also remarked, extends to all fields of human knowledge not in the sense that she is qualified to teach all about them but in the sense that she is qualified to see how their teachings and discoveries stand up in the light of the truths which God has revealed to us through the mediation of the teaching Church. Each specialist, each scientist, therefore, is free to seek the truth in matters of his own competence. However, when the methods of research that he employs or when the facts that he discovers involve an apparent contradiction with the truth proposed by the Church, he must think twice about the issue and come to immediate grips with it. In a recent issue of *Theological Studies* (December 1963, p. 628), Fr. Gerald Kelly, S.J. offered a workable rule of thumb concerning the treatment of papal pronouncements on certain issues. "In infallible pronouncements the assistance of the Holy Ghost is such that it demands an absolute assent from all the faithful, even from theologians who may have thought that they had strong ar-

guments to the contrary. In non-infallible authentic pronouncements, the guarantee of divine assistance puts the presumption of truth on the part of the *magisterium* and all the faithful must give, insofar as reasonably possible, the so-called *assensus religiosus internus*, and they must abstain from publicly questioning the authentically taught doctrine."

It must be remembered here, as the Dutch Bishops pointed out in a recent pastoral (Christmas 1960), that the Holy Spirit may speak anywhere and through anyone in the Church; but the ultimate judgment as to whether or not it is truly the Holy Spirit who speaks depends upon the official teaching authority of the Church.

For the professional man or scientist, this is certainly a hard saying. Indeed, he is tempted to think: "Should I attempt to get involved in research, should I bother about probing the truths of nature? . . . I may come up with something which seems contrary to the teaching of the Church and then I will be silenced." This brings us to a consideration of our third point.

THE CHRISTIAN'S OBLIGATION TO GET INVOLVED

By reason of his very vocation, the Christian is essentially a man concerned with his fellow men and that to the extent of coming to the aid of his brother whenever he sees him in distress. He is obliged, therefore, by reason of his baptismal commitment to get involved courageously in matters which can and do plague the community.

This is a difficult point for many of us to comprehend. This is indeed understandable because, many times, our training in the Faith has been so individualistic that we fail to grasp the notion that we do not go to God as isolated individuals but only through the service of our fellow

men. We are all indeed persons and God is a personal God for each one of us; however, we go to God through the community. Christ accomplished our salvation by the gift of Himself to the Father through the gift of Himself to the community of His brothers. To share in the salvation which He has brought, the Christian has no choice but to do the same.

In this matter of service of the community we must be realists. In many instances, the Christian will receive violent opposition from his fellow citizens and not infrequently from churchmen. In some instances this opposition may be justified and in others it may not. In the latter case he may even have an obligation in conscience to resist this opposition!! It must be remembered, however, that this resistance must always be made within the established order. The Christian, therefore, must meet such situations within the order which is the Church and he must do it with Faith, Charity, Prudence and Fortitude. Through Faith the Christian must see himself as a man committed to pursuit of the truth in all things; through Charity he must treat with the love of Christ all those who oppose this commitment. His Prudence must not be conceived as inaction. His Fortitude must not be seen as irascibility. The Church's history is full of striking examples of resistance to opposition in the search for truth: Paul withstood Peter to his face; Catherine of Siena was a thorn in the side of the Avignon Popes, and Ignatius of Loyola spent a good period of his latter days in disagreement with the Popes he had vowed to serve.

When such resistance is necessary, it must never be forgotten that it must always be made within the framework of order and exercised therein with a spirit of Christian Faith and Charity. There is a world

of difference between the resistance of Cranmer and that of Pole; between the resistance of Cromwell and that of More; between the resistance of Lacordaire and that of Lamennais.

HAS THE TIME COME?

The points which have been made above are most important for an objective evaluation of Dr. Rock's recent book. In no way do they intend a defense of his position on artificial birth control. They do indicate, however, one significant fact: in condemning Dr. Rock for forcing his point of view in the face of the Church's teaching, we must not also condemn him for all that his book has actually done. As Cardinal Cushing has pointed out in an official statement (April 30, 1963) [*Cf. LQ*, May 1963, pp. 94-95], there are many things in the book that are bad but there are also some things that are good. It is good to have our attention called to the concern we must have for the problems of population increase. It is good to have our attention called to the unfortunate tactics we Catholics have sometimes employed against our opponents in this matter. It is good to have our attention called to the great need there is at present for the establishment of a public policy on this issue in our pluralistic society. It is

good, finally, to have our attention called to the necessity of seeking federal and private grants to stimulate research with a view to making the system of periodic continence safe and workable.

Dr. Rock states that "the time has come." *Has* it really? Our answer to this question should be both "yes" and "no." The time has *not* come for us to fly in the face of the teaching Church, to ignore her message and her constant doctrine, to present her as ready to change her established position for the sake of expedience. The time *has* come, however, for us to be stirred out of the lethargy of cozy Christianity into which we might have fallen: one which refuses to face real issues because they might interfere with our comfort and established position; one which refuses to take action because it might meet opposition; one which refuses to bear witness because it might not be expedient.

We must rightly criticize Dr. Rock for the stand he has taken contrary to the teachings of the Church but we must ask ourselves honestly if we too cannot be criticized for failing to be sincerely concerned about a problem which is almost overwhelming in its proportions and its immediacy.